

# Teacher Tests Criticized as Single Gauge

*NRC Report Faults States, Washington*

By Julie Blair

Teacher-licensure exams provide important clues about the knowledge and skills of prospective precollegiate educators, but such tests should never be used as the sole measure of an aspiring teacher's abilities, argues a report released last week by the National Research Council.

Yet 42 states and the federal government not only rely heavily on test scores to judge the quality of teachers and their teacher-preparation programs, but they also link those results directly and indirectly to funding, the study found.

"Using only one method [of assessment] is unlikely to tap the full complexity of what it means to be a good teacher," said Barbara S. Plate, the director of the Bureau for Testing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who served on the 19-member committee that wrote the report. "In order to cover the totality of competencies, you need to have multiple measures and variety in those kinds of measures."

The report, "Testing Teaching Candidates: The Role of Licensure Tests in Improving Teacher Quality," was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and prepared by the National Research Council.

Release of the study comes just before colleges and universities are required by federal law to submit comprehensive report

*Continued on Page 19*

## Report Critical of Testing Practices

*Continued from Page 1*

cards to states profiling their teacher-preparation programs and graduates. The data, due April 9, must include passing rates on state exams, among other information.

States, in turn, are required by Congress to rank institutions by those passing rates and place them into quartiles in a second report card to be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education by Oct. 9. (See *Education Week*, March 28, 2001.)

According to the NRC report, the requirements of that law, Title II of the Higher Education Act, reauthorized in 1998, "create a mechanism that could limit federal funding to state and teacher-preparation programs based on students' performance on state teacher tests."

Supporters of such measures, meanwhile, argue that passing rates on state exams provide essential information about the qualifications of new teachers. They believe that readers of the report cards will know in one glance which schools are producing graduates who meet minimum state standards.

"No one is under any illusion that the tests do anything more than that," Rep. George Miller of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Education and the Workforce Committee and a co-sponsor of the Title II legislation, said in a statement. "Schools of education are the beneficiaries of \$2 billion annually in federally subsidized student aid. We think the least those schools could tell us is whether or not those students are being adequately prepared to pass their first hurdle in entering the teaching profession."

### Technically Sound

State education officials, representatives of teacher-preparation programs and K-12 schools, college officials, and education researchers served on the National Research Council's committee.

The panel examined a sample of five teacher-licensing exams produced by the Educational Testing Service, the Princeton, N.J., test-maker that provides many of the exams used. All the assessments were taken from the PRAXIS I and II series, which test mastery of basic skills, subject-matter knowledge, and understanding of the theories needed to teach it.

National Evaluation Systems, a company based in Amherst, Mass., is also a predominant producer of such tests. But "despite concerted and repeated efforts," the NRC committee said, it could not obtain enough information about that company's tests to draw conclusions about them.

Exams are administered at various points in an aspiring teacher's career: for admission to a teacher-preparation program, upon entry to student teaching or at graduation, and to obtain a license. While some states use only one assessment during a stu-

dent's preparation, others give several exams before his or her formal entry into the field.

The study found that standardized tests used to license beginning teachers are technically sound and do provide important information. However, the panel found, they don't reveal all that educators understand, or adequately predict classroom success.

Initial-licensure tests "rely almost exclusively on content-related evidence," the report says. "Few, if any, developers are collecting evidence about how test results relate to other relevant measures of a candidate's knowledge, skills, and abilities."

It is distressing, then, says the report, that 42 states rely heavily on standardized tests to gauge the competence of novice teachers.

### Title II Measures

The report also finds fault with the federal government for indirectly using passing rates on such exams to determine which teacher-preparation programs will be barred from receiving some federal funding. Under Title II of the Higher Education Act, Congress can withhold financial aid from students who attend traditional or alternative teacher-preparation programs, and money earmarked for professional development from schools that are deemed "low performing" by the states—a designation often made by looking at passing rates.

To prevent their institutions from being so designated, the NRC panel says, states may increase mandatory passing rates on exams—a move that could keep many people out of the profession at a time of teacher shortages in many places and specialties.

Because minority students tend to score lower than their white peers on standardized tests, the report says, the diversity of the teaching workforce could be limited.

Officials at the Education Department, however, say that Title II in no way mandates that states use passing rates on teacher-licensing exams as the sole criterion in determining which institutions are low-performing.

States can, in fact, use any number of factors in making that decision, said Maureen A. McLaughlin, a deputy assistant secretary for the education department. Moreover, no federal funding will be withdrawn from teacher-preparation programs or students unless the state first loses confidence in the school and cuts off that source of funding, she said.

The debate over the single and multiple assessments has been raging for years and will continue to be an important debate, said David G. Imig, the president and chief executive officer of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, a Washington group that represents 735 teacher-preparation programs.

"We know no single test will adequately measure the ability of teachers to perform or to achieve

### Teacher Testing

This chart shows the number of states using initial teacher-licensure tests to support varied decisions about candidates in 1998-99.

	Basic skills	Subject-matter knowledge	Pedagogical knowledge	Subject-specific knowledge
Admission to teacher education	19	3	0	0
Eligibility for student teaching or degree conferral	1	3	2	2
Licensure	18	25	26	5
Total	38	31	28	7

SOURCE: National Research Council

results in the classroom," he said. Massachusetts is one state where teacher testing has been particularly controversial, especially after 59 percent of those who took the exam failed its first administration. (See *Education Week*, Dec. 9, 1998.)

Nevertheless, officials there say they are pleased with the outcome. Massachusetts has improved its teacher workforce substantially by requiring prospective educators to take basic-skills tests in order to earn licenses, said Ann L. Duffy, the state's associate commissioner for education quality.

The tests, produced by National Evaluation Systems, provide districts with the knowledge that candidates have at least met a minimum standard, she said, and show colleges and the state which skills teachers have not mastered. That leads to needed changes in programs, she said.

Ms. Duffy added that Massachusetts uses other measures as well to judge prospective teachers, such as college transcripts.

"It is a baseline measure," Ms. Duffy said of the teacher test. "It is one piece of the puzzle."

### 'A Low Bar'

Despite the state's pledge to use multiple measures, decisions on hiring ultimately rest with passing rates on the standardized tests, said Stephen E. Gorrie, the president of the Massachusetts

Teachers Association.

"The bottom line is that even if you are highly successful in college," Mr. Gorrie said, "and you don't pass the test, you don't get into the school system."

Some educators and policymakers say that standardized exams are useful because they illuminate which teacher-preparation programs need improvement.

"We would certainly argue that state teacher-licensing exams are by no means good enough or rigorous enough, but if schools of education can't get students to pass such a low bar, they have no business in the area of teacher preparation," said Amy Wilkins, a principal partner at the Education Trust, a Washington-based nonprofit organization that promotes high achievement for poor and minority students. Failure on state li-

censure exams "should send up a big, red flare," said Ms. Wilkins, whose organization helped draft the Title II legislation.

Rep. Miller, the California Democrat, pointed out that the intent of Title II was, in part, to spur schools of education to undertake changes. States such as New York and Texas, which have already employed get-tough accountability laws similar to the new federal policy, show improved scores on licensing exams, especially on those tests taken by minority students.

That means institutions are changing to meet the needs of their students, Mr. Miller said.

**FOLLOW-UP:** The report is available for \$50, plus shipping and handling, by calling (202) 334-3313. It is also online at <http://national-academies.org>.